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Stires, Ernest Milmore

American ideals and the great war

[New York?]

[1917]

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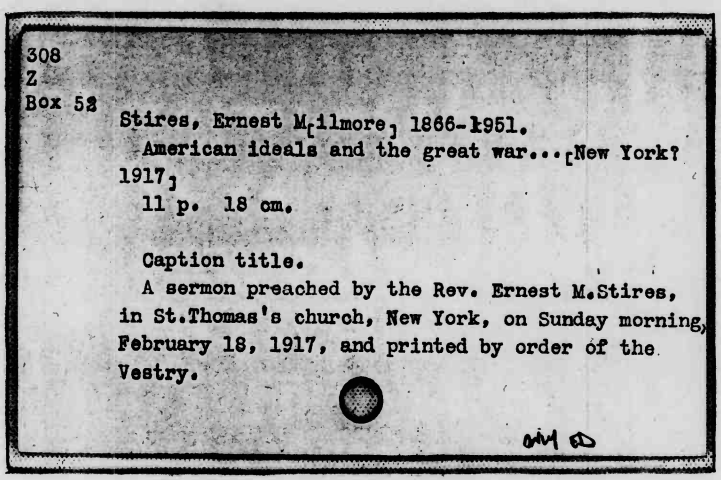
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A sermon preached by the Rev. Ernest M.Stires, in St.Thomas's church, New York, on Sunday morning, February 18, 1917, and printed by order of the Vestry.

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American Ideals and the Great War*

"LOOK UNTO THE ROCK WHENCE YE ARE HEWN."— ISAIAH 51: 1.

NATIONAL days are of high value; whether they recall important historic events, or whether they commemorate the birthdays of men whose devotion and ability founded or guided or saved a nation. Whatever stimulates the exercise of thoughtful, grateful memory increases wisdom and courage, and builds a greater structure upon the firm foundation of tested principles.

Such use of memory is constantly commanded in the Word of God. Moses warned the people, "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee;" and seven centuries later Isaiah gives similar counsel, "Look unto

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the rock whence ye are hewn." To me these words seem filled with timely meaning for our country, throwing clear light on our ideals, our rights, our duties; and they have all the arresting power of a sharp command.

The approaching anniversary of Washington's birth sees his country threatened by the greatest peril. Not merely by war—there are greater dangers than war; and not from without, but from within, where the evil is more subtle and deadly. At this moment the nation is not united, but divided in thought and feeling. This condition is not the result of careful study and conscientious reasoning followed by different conclusions—that is a healthy, normal, frequent experience. No, our lack of unity to-day is caused largely by ignorance and selfishness. Between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts there are more than fifty million people who must be ignorant of American ideals, who must have forgotten Lincoln's description of the nation which our fathers founded upon this continent, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to justice and humanity, and who do not feel that we have been consecrated to keep and extend those principles.

It is not strange that ignorance of

our own ideals has led to ignorance of the ideals of other nations. To ignore these is selfish and perilous; to misrepresent them is unjust and most perilous. Yet many millions of our citizens ignore or confuse the two contradictory systems which are engaged in a death grapple in Europe. "Is it nothing to you, O ye who pass by?"

Even our present crisis is not understood. Many were indignant at Germany's brutal order of January 31, were wrathfully insistent that her Ambassador should go, are annoyed that our harbors are congested, and our freight trains blocked for hundreds of miles. But they do not know what it is all about, and except where it inconveniences them, they do not seem to care. A thoughtful friend of mine gave me a graphic illustration of this several days ago. He said, "You can imagine a man entering a bar-room, and followed a little later by two other men who engage in a row which grows into a fight. The first man takes no interest in the affair until one of the contestants treads heavily upon his foot, which infuriates him and he kicks back. But his contribution has no relation to the cause of the fight, of which he knows and cares nothing." Do you think it a small

thing that the majority of people in this country to-day see no more than this in our present position? That they know so little of our fundamental principles, that they are so blind to the cause of the great war, and are conscious of no particular interest which this country should have in the victory of one system over the other in the great conflict? It is pitiful, and it is dangerous.

One could wish that ignorance might be given as the sole and sufficient explanation of this condition. Unfortunately, growing possibly out of ignorance, self-interest must also be alleged. They prefer peace. So do we, but peace with honor; peace with loyalty to the American principles of human freedom, of justice for all nations, little and big; of the sacredness of treaties, and a decent respect for human life, and the natural rights of peaceful men and women and little children. No true American can desire peace when all these are attacked with "frightfulness," and their extinction threatened, even if he fails to see that the success of such an attack would make him the next victim. They believe that "we do pretty well when we take care of ourselves," to quote Mr. Mann in the House of Representatives, day before yesterday. Take

care of ourselves? By all means, but does that mean our character, our country's honor, or merely our mean, selfish skins? To take care of ourselves, our better selves, is our most solemn duty. God help us first to come to ourselves!

They tell us, too, that the Monroe Doctrine is our chief concern, that we must not be compelled to sit at the council-board when peace is made, that we have no interest in the Balkans or in European intrigues. Have these gentlemen learned nothing in the last twenty years? Let them remember that the Monroe Doctrine rests mainly upon two factors: one is our unselfish purpose that the countries south of us shall have their chance to develop a free democracy unthreatened by Europe; the other factor is our naval and military strength to insure this. Let the powers have reason to doubt our unselfishness, let them sneer at our forgetfulness of fundamental principles, the rock whence we were hewn, let them despise decadent Americanism, and what will be the strength of the Monroe Doctrine? We shall possess neither sufficient character nor physical force to withstand attack from our natural enemies, or from those who were our natural friends, but whose scorn we earned.

Of course we must sit at the council-board when peace is made. We can do that without pledging ourselves to cross the Atlantic with an army and navy whenever there is an uprising in the Balkans. Our friends, if we have intelligence and character enough to know who our friends are, will respect our ideals and our reasonable sphere of influence, as we will respect theirs. Justice is not dethroned because one great power threatened her. Humanity and law will be more sacred than ever when this contest closes. But alas for the nation that stood afar off, caring only for itself, when multitudes were gathered in the valley of decision, with greed and might leading one host, while the other was guided by honor, right and humanity! It is far worse than stupid to confuse these, or to place them on the same level, or to say that that controversy over the character of world-policy does not concern us. We have entered the great world, we have far-flung colonies, we compelled the "open door" in Japan and we are pledged to it in China. These responsibilities, like our Monroe Doctrine, can be maintained only by the friendship of those whose ideals are like our own. Friendship is a reciprocal relationship, and at

this moment the nations whose ideals are identical with ours are fighting for their lives. Those who are not blind see that they are fighting for us, too. But what of those who know not their friends, or care not if they be in peril, and are indifferent to that which touches their own honor and security?

Utterances of certain members of Congress during the last few days must be taken seriously because they are symptomatic of a national menace. A Democratic representative charged that twenty-five of the greatest newspapers of this country have been bribed by steel, ship-building and munition interests in order to control their policy. He refuses to give any evidence of the truth of the charge, or to name a single guilty paper. One metropolitan journal has offered a large reward for the proof of the charge. It is not likely that proof will ever be found.

Two days ago the Democratic Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate declared that "there is a cabal of great newspapers in this country seeking to coerce the government of the United States into an attitude of hostility with one of the belligerent powers." It is bad enough to know that we have men in Congress who

can really believe such things, but it is far worse to realize that millions of our people will accept the statements as true.

Add to these the speech, two days ago, of Mr. Mann, of Illinois, Republican leader of the House of Representatives, already quoted, and concluding with the pious expression, "God only knows where we will land if this country enters the war!" and you can determine without assistance whether a danger far worse than war threatens the nation today. Yes, "God only knows where we will land if this country enters the war;" and He only knows where we will land if it should become our duty to enter and we fail. We may safely leave our physical security to Him, but He insists that we be the custodians of our honor, and by our loyalty or disloyalty He judges us. Personally, I do not wish to be dragged into the doom of the disloyal. Many are like-minded, but the dead-weight of widespread ignorance or selfishness is crushing the free spirit of the America of Washington and Monroe, of Lincoln and McKinley.

There is no reason for doubting the self-sacrificing patriotism of the whole people, if only they can be made to think, to remember, to understand. At the moment they have forgotten; certainly they

do not understand. They declare that we in the East are urging war for the sake of financial gain. Do they not know that our sons are enlisting, the older and the younger, that Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia have each enlisted nearly a regiment ready for training, or for service when needed? Do they think we would slay our sons for money?

Or perhaps they believe that the cabal of newspapers has utterly befooled us. That is not fair. They often accuse us of sharp practice, or worse; their ancient sentence against us is that we are "more knave than fool."

There is a third possible conclusion: That they themselves are mistaken; mistaken in their Americanism, mistaken in their apathy or their decision concerning the great war, and mistaken in their judgment of us.

Let me suggest a possible and more charitable view of ourselves. We live in the old America, the colonial states, in the cities our patriot fathers helped to build. We walk the streets they walked; we kneel in churches where they knelt; we enter the halls which rang with their eloquence; and the echoes of their mighty messages we still can hear. In every time of trial they seem very near to us; in every hour of doubt they bid us to

remember the principles for which they fought and which they committed to our care; they command us to look to the rock whence we were hewn, and urge us to withhold nothing from the cause of liberty and humanity.

It is a priceless privilege to live where they lived, to work where they worked, and it entails a heavy responsibility. If the dread experience of war shall come to this nation, brethren of the West, you will not fail; try to believe that we, too, will be found faithful; and try to believe that in that same spirit we are facing our duty in this hour. Americans can be trusted, all of them, if only they can be aroused. Once let them see clearly, and remember, then their action will be noble, worthy of all honor.

But the nation has not come to itself, it does not understand. Doubtless the shock of war would bring enlightenment, helping us to know ourselves and our friends; but the suggestion is a sad confession.

For us there are three clear duties. We are to remember that we live in the very cradle of liberty, we are to be loyal to the fathers, bone of their bone, rock of their rock. Then we are to declare our vision to our brethren, in the hope that they may see the nation's place as

we see it. Finally, we are to know our true friends, across the sea, and send a cheer from those who remember, and understand, and who already in spirit are at their side.

Nearly twenty years ago our American ideals led us to war for others. Germany showed marked unfriendliness to us at once, and at Manila it was open enmity. From the first England was our friend, and saved us more than we knew. The declarations of war between the United States and Spain came between April 23 and 25, 1898. On April 22, while Spain was considering our ultimatum, and Germany was exhibiting a threatening attitude, the following poem was cabled from England to this country:

(April 22, 1898)

"America! dear brotherland;
While yet the shotted guns are mute,
Accept a brotherly salute,
A hearty grasp of England's hand.

"To-morrow, when the sulphurous glow
Of war shall dim the stars above,
Be sure the star of England's love
Is over you, come weal, come woe.

"Go forth in hope! Go forth in might!
To all your nobler self be true,
That coming times may see in you
The vanguard of the hosts of light.

"Though wrathful Justice load and train
Your guns, be every breach they make
A gateway pierced for Mercy's sake,
That Peace may enter in and reign.

"Then, should the hosts of darkness band
Against you, lowering thunderously,
Flash the word 'Brother!' o'er the sea
And England at your side shall stand—

"Exulting! For, though dark the night,
And sinister with scud and rack,
The hour that brings us back to back
But harbingers the larger light."

No such message have we sent to England in her hour of trial. France, who poured out her blood and treasure for us, has never received anything at our hands. To-day they fight for our ideals, and our nation does not know it. God of our fathers, in Thy mercy, bring the great awakening!

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